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# THE GEOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

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## ESKIMO ART \*

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Geological Survey of Canada

One of the most fascinating problems in ethnological study is the presence of a highly developed art among races that are in a very low stage of culture. Our paleolithic ancestors in western Europe covered the walls of their cave dwellings with lifelike paintings of the men and animals around them; and in South Africa the primitive Bushmen adorned their rock shelters with equally realistic figures in black and white. So, too, the Eskimos of the Arctic, using only flakes of flint or treasured scraps of iron, carved and engraved on bone and ivory with a skill that excited the admiration of every early explorer. This graphic art was universal among the Eskimos, extending from Alaska on the one side to Greenland on the other; it dates from prehistoric times until the present day. Every large museum in Europe and America is filled with excellent examples of it. There are not only carvings of men and animals, free and in relief, but exquisite engravings, from elaborate representations of hunting and domestic scenes down to simple geometrical patterns. It is true that there are great differences in the artistic ability of different tribes. In southern Alaska it is almost the exception to find an article of bone or ivory without decoration of some kind; even so utilitarian and commonplace an object as a bucket handle often has a row of seals or other animals carved in relief on its surface. Farther east, in Coronation Gulf, the only designs are a few incised lines, even though the beautifully polished bone needle cases and quiver handles would naturally lend themselves to more elaborate ornamentation. Sculpture reappears, however, in Hudson Bay; and in East Greenland, among one of the most barbarous and impoverished of all the Eskimo tribes, it reached almost the same high level as in Alaska. Every branch of the Eskimo race, indeed, seems to possess marked artistic ability, although in some places, owing partly to unfavorable economic conditions, the talent remained more latent than it did elsewhere.

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## INFLUENCE OF EUROPEAN CIVILIZATION

This highly developed art of the Eskimos, far from being destroyed by contact with European civilization, as happened so often elsewhere, received a certain stimulus. Thus there are strong grounds for believing that the exceptional development of sculpture and engraving among the Alaskan Eskimos was due to contact with the Indian tribes on the northwest coast and with Russian civilization filtering in through Asia. In more recent times the settlement of Alaska by Americans has led to the creation of a regular industry in ivory work; and though most of the carving and engraving that is now being produced and sold to the outside world is of a much inferior quality, despite the use of modern tools and machinery, now and again some specimen does really attain to, if not actually surpass, the work of previous generations. The same thing has happened, although to a less degree, on the Hudson Bay side of the continent and again in Greenland.

Such unusual artistic talent among a primitive nomadic race of hunters could not fail to attract the notice of scientists, and various writers, Hoffman,<sup>1</sup> Boas,<sup>2</sup> and Thalbitzer,<sup>3</sup> have discussed their work in bone and ivory. One development from it, however, the pencil sketches of the Eskimos, has been altogether neglected in English-speaking countries up to the present, although one or two explorers, notably Peary and MacMillan, have published a few examples of it. The use of pencil and paper is of course quite modern, but it is merely an improvement on the old Eskimo custom of using native graphite for drawing on wood and skin. The ease and freedom of a pencil, however, has made these paper sketches a popular pastime, and amateur artists are everywhere recording their impressions and adventures in notebooks, on the margins of old magazines, and on any scrap of paper that they can find. In Danish Greenland the Eskimos have long run a printing press and published a journal devoted almost entirely to Eskimo topics and illustrated with sketches by native artists. In fact, wherever you wander, if you give a notebook and pencil to an Eskimo, whether he can write or not, he is almost certain to fill the book with drawings of men and animals, hunting scenes, and scenes of social life.

Naturally the average native, even with the pencil, is still bound by his old tradition; his drawings show the same want of perspective, the same lack of detail, and the same conventionality as his engravings and carvings. Nevertheless, under the influence of new ideas inspired by the European sketches which the Eskimos are fond of copying, an artist does occasionally rise above the general level and produce a few drawings that display real imagination and promise. It is not that he departs from the old subjects; his talent is still limited to the delineation of hunting scenes and social life

<sup>1</sup> W. J. Hoffman: *The Graphic Art of the Eskimos*, *Rept. U. S. Natl. Museum for the Year Ending June 30, 1895*, pp. 739-968.

<sup>2</sup> Franz Boas: *The Central Eskimo*, *6th Ann. Rept. Bur. of Amer. Ethnology for 1884-85*, pp. 399-669; *idem*: *Decorative Designs of Alaskan Needlecases*, *Proc. U. S. Natl. Museum*, Vol. 34, Washington, D. C., 1908, pp. 321-344.

<sup>3</sup> William Thalbitzer: *The Ammassalik Eskimo*, *Meddelelser om Grønland*, Vol. 39.

as he knows it; but he develops an impressionistic idea of the scene as a totality, replete with detail and environment, together with a vague notion of perspective and a truer sense of proportion. It does not require much imagination to believe that if one of these Eskimo artists could only receive a little training he might produce something that would be worth hanging in our salons alongside the pen-and-ink sketches from Japan or the drawings of our own impressionistic schools.

#### EXAMPLES OF ESKIMO ART FROM THREE DIFFERENT REGIONS

This new development in Eskimo art aroused the interest of the American Geographical Society, who gathered a number of examples of it from two well-known explorers, Mr. D. B. MacMillan and Mr. R. J. Flaherty. The drawings supplied by Mr. MacMillan were made by Kakotcheea, a nineteen-year old Eskimo of Smith Sound in northern Greenland, where Mr. MacMillan established a base for his explorations. The Smith Sound Eskimos were discovered by Sir John Ross in 1818; since that date they have been visited by many explorers and whalers, some of whom, for example Kane and Peary, remained for two or more years in their midst. Mr. Flaherty's sketches are from an altogether different region. They are the compositions of Wetalltok, an Eskimo from the Great Whale seaboard on the eastern coast of Hudson Bay. Wetalltok had been in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company for about fifteen years and beside these drawings contributed a remarkably accurate sketch map of the Belcher Islands,<sup>4</sup> a map that is itself one of the best examples of the cartographic skill for which the Eskimos have long been famous.

To the sketches from these two regions I have added a few that were drawn for me in the winter of 1913-1914 by an Eskimo from Cape Prince of Wales in northern Alaska. This Eskimo, named Ugiagnak, was a middle-aged man who could neither read nor write, although he had been in contact with white men all his life. The natives of northern Alaska were less advanced in graphic art than those of southern Alaska but far more so than either the Hudson Bay Eskimos or those of Smith Sound. Our three artists, then, from three different regions, are interesting on two quite distinct grounds. In the first place the identity of subject matter in all three bears witness to the remarkable uniformity of Eskimo culture despite the enormous range of territory over which it extends. In the second place, the differences in technique of the three men give us an indication of the direction which this graphic art may take among the Eskimos, if ever they are afforded the opportunity of developing it.

#### HUNTING SCENES

Figures 1-5 illustrate the Eskimo method of hunting the walrus. The season for walrus hunting is the late summer, when the sea is covered with

<sup>4</sup> Published in the *Geographical Review*, Vol. 5, 1918, p. 440.

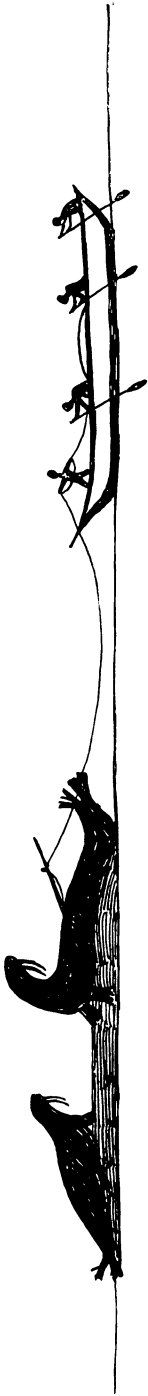


FIG. 1

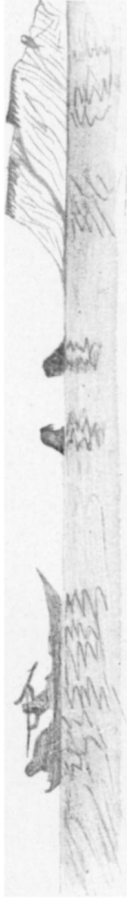


FIG. 2

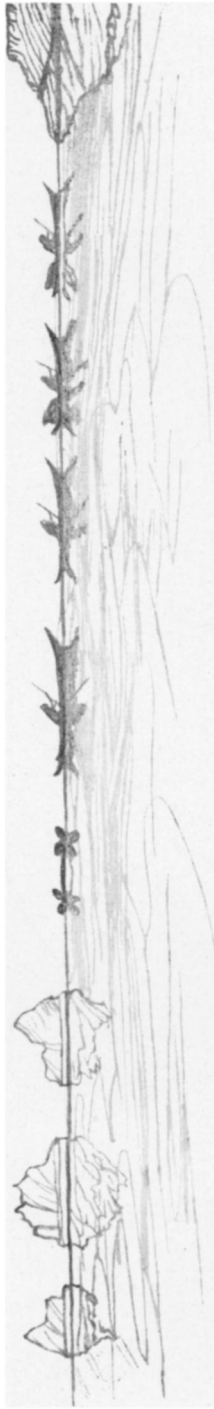


FIG. 3

FIG. 1—Harpooning walrus on the ice. By Ugiagnak, an Eskimo of northern Alaska. This and the other drawings by Ugiagnak are reproduced the size of the original, the drawings by Kakotchchea and Wetalltok are slightly reduced.

FIG. 2—Harpooning walrus in the water. By Kakotchchea, an Eskimo of Smith Sound.

FIG. 3—Kayaks towing a dead walrus to which are fastened two sealskin floats to keep the body on the surface. By Kakotchchea.

loose cakes of floating ice that offer very little obstruction to navigation in small boats. The animals are harpooned either while swimming in the water (Fig. 2), or as they bask in the sunshine on some floating ice cake (Fig. 1); the *coup de grâce* is now usually given with the rifle. The carcass is then towed to shore (Figs. 3 and 4) or to the nearest ice floe and immediately cut up (Fig. 5). In Alaska, as we see from Figure 1, the hunter makes use of the large skin boat called umiak, which resembles in shape our whaleboat. Among most Eskimo tribes this is regarded as the woman's boat and is used only for transportation; the hunter's vessel is the smaller one-man kayak, as shown in Figures 2 and 3. But in Alaska the umiak is used for both whale and walrus hunting, the women serving in the latter pursuit as paddlers only. The middle paddler in Figure 1 is plainly a woman, for her hair is tied in a knot on the back of her head.

These five sketches taken together depict a scene which might occur any day in the month of August either off the northwest coast of Alaska or in Hudson Bay or on the coast of Greenland. But there are noticeable differences in the artistic value of the sketches. Figure 1, from Alaska, shows all the hardness and conventionality of the etchings on ivory which are so common in this region; it might easily have been one of these etchings transferred to paper. The artist's imagination is confined to a silhouette outline of the essential features of his subject. There are the two walruses on an ice cake, the boat, the paddlers, the harpooner, and his weapon, every one of which is absolutely essential to the interpretation of the drawing. Beyond this there is nothing, not even an indication of the sea. It is a picture story, a graphic description of an event the details of which are left to the imagination. Conventional as it is, however, it is far from being a mere pictograph; the startled attitudes of the walruses and the vigor with which the women are driving their paddles into the water give character and realism to the drawing that no mere pictograph can ever possess. Figure 4, from Hudson Bay, shows the same limitations, the same silhouette outline and lack of all atmosphere, although the artist has tried to convey a sense of the environment by adding dogs and driftwood. But in Figure 5, from the same region, a new feature is introduced, a dawning sense of perspective. The artist is not quite sure of it, and in consequence his landscape seems divorced from his main subject, the cutting up of the walrus; but he has taken a great step forward and achieved something which his ancestors, for all their skill in carving and etching, never dreamed of. The event is no longer taken out of its setting, but the two are combined into one artistic whole. He has accomplished this, too, without any loss of the old vigor; so that, crude and imperfect as his sketch undoubtedly is, it yet shows possibilities of great development. We can see a growth in Figures 2 and 3, from Smith Sound. In these the artist has a much clearer vision of the details and surroundings of his theme. His kayakers are traveling over a sea full of ripples and reflections. Figure 2 even adds a new feature, the use of shading to give depth and distance. This Smith Sound



FIG. 4

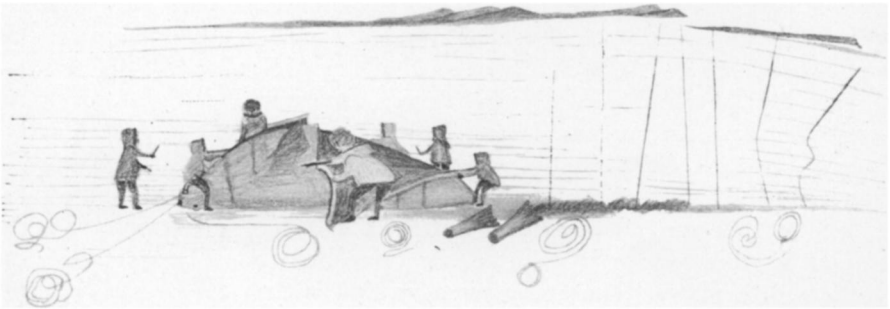


FIG. 5



FIG. 6



FIG. 7

- FIG. 4—Dragging a walrus on to the beach. By Wetalltok, an Eskimo of Hudson Bay.  
 FIG. 5—Skinning a walrus. By Wetalltok.  
 FIG. 6—Hunter stalking a seal. By Ugiagnak.  
 FIG. 7—Going after seal (or walrus) in Kayaks. By Wetalltok.

artist has certainly traveled far beyond the Alaskan artist of Figure 1, or the engravers on bone and ivory.

Two methods of sealing, both of them common in every part of the Eskimo world, are depicted in Figures 6 and 7. In Figure 6, by the Alaskan artist, the hunter is represented as crawling stealthily over the surface of the ice towards his quarry. This is a method adopted in the spring of the year, when the seals are basking in the sunshine outside their holes. In Figure 7, by Wetalltok, the Hudson Bay Eskimo, the summer method is



FIG. 8—Hunting caribou. By Wetalltok.



FIG. 9—Caribou scenting hunters. By Kakotcheca.

represented. The seals (and walruses) are then either basking on floating ice cakes or swimming in the water around them. The hunters sometimes harpoon them from their kayaks; more often they paddle over to a small ice cake near by, draw up their kayaks, and fasten the end of the harpoon line round a hummock of ice. They then cautiously work their raft towards the seals and drive in their harpoons. The animals dive but are prevented from escaping by the line fastened to the hummock. This method of hunting has survived even the use of rifles, for in the late summer seals lose much of the blubber that gives them their buoyancy and sink as soon as they are killed.

This drawing of Wetalltok illustrates the lack of proportion that is so common in Eskimo drawings. Almost invariably, in depicting men and animals, the head is made out of scale with the rest of the figure; in the present case the seals and the ice cake are much too large. Moreover, the artist, although learning the use of perspective, has not been able to free himself from the old conventionalism. His ice cake is purely a conven-



FIG. 10

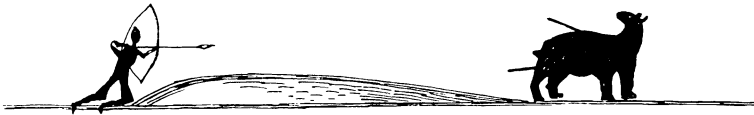


FIG. 11



FIG. 12

FIG. 10—Muskox. By Kakotchaea.

FIG. 11—Hunting the polar bear. By Ugiagnak.

FIG. 12—Closing in on a polar bear with a team of dogs. It is the custom upon sighting a bear to release the dogs in order to hold the bear at bay until the driver arrives with the rifle or lance to despatch it. By Kakotchaea.

tional one, and his seals have the traditional impersonality. His sketches of caribou in Figure 8 are far superior. They are depicted in different attitudes, all of them true to life. One is quietly grazing, another walking slowly towards it, a third lying on its side. Near the two hunters, who are armed with the old-fashioned bows and arrows, the caribou have leaped to their feet, startled; and one is running away. Over on the right is the hunters' sled with the dogs lying down in front. Excellent as the individual figures are, there is no background of any kind; they are simply an artist's studies.

Kakotcheea's sketch (Fig. 9) is quite different; it has an impressionistic touch quite new in Eskimo art. There is less variety in the attitudes of the caribou, and the horns are a little too uniform and conventional; but they are true to life, and the background is just sufficiently pronounced to give a sense of realism. It is a curious thing, indeed, that the Eskimos have always been more successful in portraying caribou than anything else; the proportions are more accurate, and the action is more vivid. No doubt it is partly due to the fact that the dependence of the Canadian and Greenland Eskimos upon the caribou for a large portion of their food supply has made

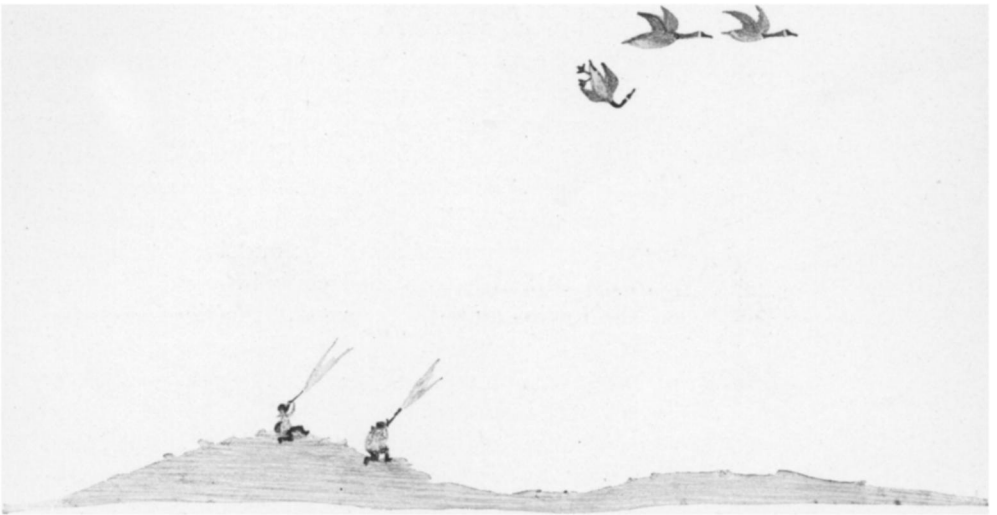


FIG. 13—Shooting geese. By Wetalltok.

them keen students of its actions and attitudes, and this has reflected itself in their art. The same reason would apply also to Alaska, although now the domesticated reindeer has taken the place of the wild caribou, which has been almost exterminated in that region. Yet this explanation alone can hardly be sufficient, otherwise we should expect the same excellence in the representations of the musk ox, which in Smith Sound is almost as important to the Eskimos as the caribou; but, as Figure 10 will illustrate, their drawings of musk oxen show much less fidelity to life. The main reason must surely be that the caribou, so universal once throughout Arctic America and the neighboring portion of Asia and so indispensable to the Eskimos for food and clothing, has been a favorite subject for representation from the very dawn of their art; whereas the musk ox with its more restricted range and lesser economic importance has a far shorter tradition behind it, and artists have not developed the same technique in its portrayal.

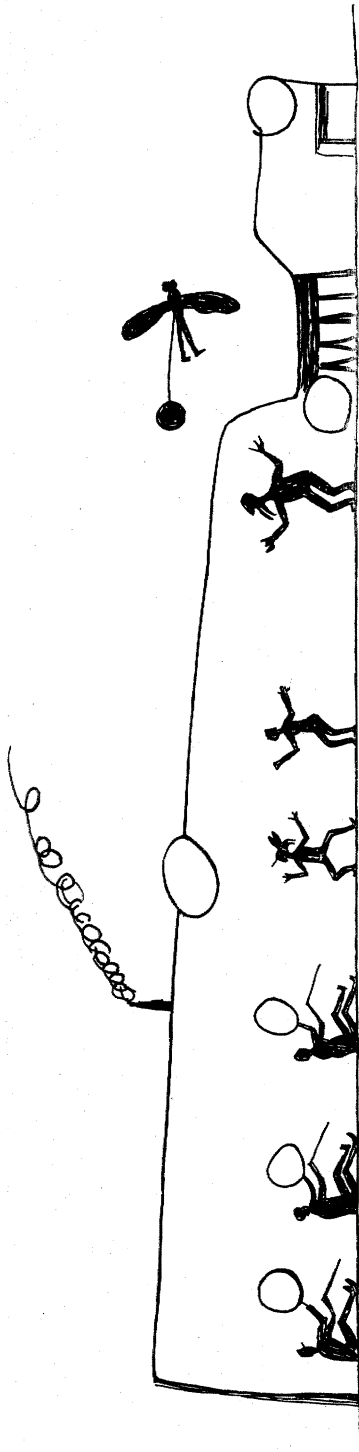


FIG. 14—Scene in a dance house. By Ugiagnak.

Figures 11 and 12 illustrate the hunting of the polar bear, which is common almost everywhere in circumpolar regions. One method is to stalk up cautiously behind ice hummocks and to shoot at close range, formerly with bow and arrow, as in Figure 11, now with the rifle. The polar bear is rather a timid animal until it is brought to bay; even then, in Eskimo estimation, it is less formidable than the Barren Ground grizzly. The method of hunting shown in Figure 12, bringing it to bay with dogs, is more certain of success. During the summer of 1915 a party of Eskimos with whom I was traveling on Victoria Island came upon a polar bear and its cub, the latter nearly full-grown, quietly swimming across a lake. They fled at sight of us; and the Eskimos, loosing the dogs, pursued them on foot. The cub was overtaken after a stiff chase of about three miles, the mother two miles farther on; and both were shot with a rifle. Before rifles came into use, however, the Eskimos used to surround the bear and stab it to death with harpoons and lances, although often one or more of their number was killed or severely wounded.

The last of the hunting scenes in this collection, Figure 13, is also in some ways the most remarkable. Two Eskimos clad in white overshirts, or "dickies," are shooting at a flock of geese flying overhead on their annual migration. Nowhere in Eskimo art have I seen anything approaching the excellence of these birds both in form and detail. The careful shading of the underparts alone would attest European influence. There is still a little stiffness, especially in the foremost bird, but the general effect is remarkably realistic. One can hardly credit the production of this sketch and that of Figure 7 to the same artist.

#### SOCIAL SCENES

Hunting scenes and game animals are by far the commonest subjects of Eskimo art. However, we do occasionally find, even on bone and ivory, scenes of social life such as that given in Figure 14, where the artist has taken as his subject a



FIG. 15—Eskimo summer camp. By Wetalltok.

dance held inside one of the wooden houses, half buried beneath the snow, in which the Eskimos of Alaska pass the winter. The mingling of ancient and modern elements in their present-day culture comes out in the juxtaposition of a skylight of seal intestines sewn together and a chimney belching forth smoke from a sheet-iron stove inside. The figures of the three drummers seated at the back of the room are instinct with vivacity and the *joie de danse*. The prancing attitude of the plume-bedecked man, and the swaying motion of the woman, well illustrate the difference in the methods of dancing of the two sexes. The last figure on the right has a religious significance. It represents a shaman or medicine man inspired by his guardian spirit, the walrus, and simulating the form of that animal by the two tusks that protrude magically from his mouth. The shaman among the Eskimos was a public functionary who gave most of his performances in the dance house. He claimed to control certain of the spirits which were believed to govern the universe, spirits of animals and of mythical beings through which he could regulate the supply of game. One of them is shown in this illustration flying unseen through the air above the dance house in search of caribou, and trailing a large stone with which to kill his enemies. Many other miracles are recorded of them, and even today the natives of Alaska firmly believe in their power, though shamanism is now dead and all the Eskimos in this region have embraced Christianity.

#### SUMMER ENCAMPMENT

Summer encampments are becoming rather a popular subject for representation among the Eskimos, although comparatively rare in the old engravings. We have two such drawings in this collection, Figures 15 and 16, both by the same Hudson Bay native, Wetalltok. In the latter he has deviated from the old traditional art only in one figure, that of the man peering inside the tent, which shows a little more imagination than is usual in etchings on bone and ivory. The tents, the dogs, and the man standing are as conventional as ever. Figure 15, on the contrary, belongs to the new age that recognizes perspec-

tive and shading without as yet mastering either. It is a fair example of the ability of the average Eskimo to depict a landscape. The artist has chosen for his subject an everyday scene in summer, when the Eskimos of both Hudson Bay and Greenland pitch their tents on the seashore and with their kayaks hunt the seals in the open waters of the bays and fiords. Figure 17, by the same Eskimo, Wetalltok, shows one of their methods of traveling at this period.

### SUMMER AND WINTER TRAVEL

As long as the Eskimos remain on the shore they can move from one sealing ground to another in their large skin boats. But summer is also the season for fishing and caribou hunting; the salmon are now migrating



FIG. 16—Eskimo tents. By Wetalltok.

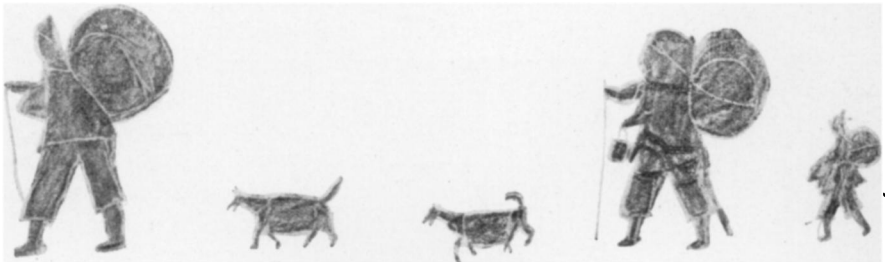


FIG. 17—Eskimos traveling with packs in summer. By Wetalltok.

up the creeks and rivers to spawn, and the caribou have shed their heavy winter coats and are now covered with short-haired fur invaluable for lighter clothing. The rivers are mostly too rapid and too shoal for boats, and moreover the caribou are grazing on the open plains or on the slopes of the hills. So the Eskimo loads all the necessary equipment on his back or on the backs of his dogs and moves away inland. The man always leads on these migrations, for at any moment game may be sighted and he may have to drop his pack and go off hunting; the wife and children follow him, carrying the tent and the household utensils. An Eskimo thinks nothing of traveling 14 or 15 miles with a load of 100 pounds on his back and at the end of the day spending four or five hours in hunting. The women carry almost equal

loads, and the children in proportion to their size, while a dog's pack varies from 20 to 50 pounds. Traveling is somewhat easier at other seasons of the year, for the Eskimo can then employ his sled. In Figure 18 our Smith Sound artist has contributed a sketch that partly illustrates this method. It is an impressionistic sketch of a team of dogs dragging a sled, seen from the viewpoint of the driver. Europeans have introduced the custom of driving dogs like horses, singly or in pairs one behind the other, with the most intelligent as the leader; but in many places the Eskimos still cling to the use of a separate trace for each dog, as in the illustration. There are many inconveniences in the method, but it has one advantage; the dogs can all be released simultaneously at the sight of game by simply casting off their traces from the one toggle which holds them.

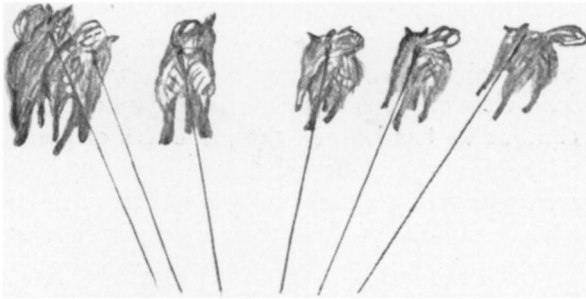


FIG. 18—Dog team viewed from sled. By Kakotcheea.

This little sketch of Kakotcheea is in some ways the most remarkable in the whole collection. In the first place the artistic conception of representing a team of dogs from behind is altogether foreign to ordinary Eskimo art. It is a photographic impression of a momentary scene, not a more or less symbolic representation of a method of traveling, as the old engravers on ivory would have made it. Again, the accuracy with which the dogs are delineated, each with some slight difference, is amazing. These panting animals tugging at their traces are totally unlike the rather lifeless, misshapen creatures of Wetalltok's creation (Figure 17). The one man might seem to have focussed an actual scene on his retina, the other merely conjured up a typical one; but I suspect that the Smith Sound native has simply copied an explorer's photograph, and that the striking individuality of his sketch is due to that source alone.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF ESKIMO ART

From these drawings taken from three different regions, Alaska, Hudson Bay, and Smith Sound, we can gather some idea of the course along which Eskimo art has been developing during the last half-century. The Alaska drawings faithfully follow the old tradition; they might have been made

on bone or on ivory a hundred years ago. The art is a purely conventional one, everything being represented in silhouette and all details being omitted that are not absolutely essential to the interpretation of the drawings. Its greatest merit lies in the fidelity to life of the figures of men and animals and the vividness with which action is portrayed. But it is essentially a "shadow" art, where figures are merely reflected as on a screen and lack both background and depth; it assumes too readily a symbolic aspect and loses touch with reality altogether—a fate that has overtaken it in many of the ivory etchings, although our artist here has avoided it. The Hudson Bay native is in the awakening stage. He has learned to sense vaguely the crowded world of color and environment and so tends to give more detail to his drawings. Moreover, he has a growing feeling for perspective, of the relation of subject to the surrounding landscape. But the defects in proportion and the stiffness and conventionality of many of his figures mark him as being in the main a follower of the older tradition. The Smith Sound artist, on the other hand, clearly belongs to the new generation. He takes an impressionistic view of his subject, not the symbolic one of the earlier artists. In technique he has learned the principles of perspective to give distance and of shading to give depth. There is a recognition, too, of the necessity for atmosphere in a picture to help out its meaning. He has not mastered completely any one of these things; his sketches are still the productions of a mere novice in the art, but of a novice who would show promise of much higher fulfilment were it not for one great weakness—a weakness that no Eskimo artist to my knowledge has yet tried to overcome—a disregard of individuality that robs a sketch of half its character.

In conclusion one word of warning may be given. Because our Alaskan representative has adhered most closely to the old traditional art of his race, and the Smith Sound one has departed most from it, it must not be assumed that Alaskan artists as a whole are very conservative, whereas those in Smith Sound are more progressive. On the contrary I have seen sketches from both Alaska and the Mackenzie River delta that show as great an advance over the old etchings on ivory as any of the illustrations given in this article. The psychological law that "similar stimuli applied to similar subjects produce similar reactions" is really quite verified, and the type of art common to all branches of the Eskimo race is developing everywhere along the same general lines under the influence of European culture.